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CIA supporters fight bill to control covert actions

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WASHINGTON — Former CIA director William E. Colby suggested yesterday that Congress threaten the intelligence agency with budget cuts to stop secret military actions of which it disapproves, rather than demanding advance approval.

Testifying before the House Intelligence Committee, Colby said requiring advance congressional authorization of covert CIA operations "will ensure that no clandestine activity of that sort will ever take place."

Colby, who is now with a Washington law firm, criticized as unwise a bill introduced by Rep. Wyche Fowler Jr. (D., Ga.) calling for advance approval of covert operations, but said the bill was "probably constitutional."

Rep. G. William Whitehurst (R., Va.), a ranking member of the panel, and Richard Larkin, a retired Army general who was a former deputy director of the CIA, both contended that Fowler's legislation would be an unconstitutional restriction on the powers of the president.

Larkin, who heads the 3,500-member Association of Former Intelligence Officers, said Fowler's proposals "do not serve the ultimate purpose of strengthening the American hand against the tough — yes, and ruthless — opposition we face in our intelligence operations abroad."

Colby and Larkin testified at the opening of three days of hearings called in response to congressional concerns over covert U.S. activities in support of Nicaraguan insurgents.

Fowler is the author of three bills calling for tougher congressional controls on the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

He said one bill would require "explicit authorization" for clandestine paramilitary or military actions unless the president finds "extraordinary circumstances" affecting vital U.S. interests.

Opening the hearing, committee chairman Edward P. Boland (D., Mass.) said Congress could do little to prevent the President from authorizing covert activities except by "publicly exposing" them. While Congress could cut off funding, he said, this would have no effect until the following fiscal year.

But Colby, warning against "unnecessary restrictions," suggested that Congress rein in the CIA by telling its director "we're going to take it out of your hide" by cutting his budget 10 times the cost of any objectionable operation. "That will get his attention," Colby promised.

The suggestion was sharply criticized by Fowler, who accused Colby of being "facetious" in suggesting such "blackmailing" of the CIA.

But Colby insisted, "It's not that far out an idea."